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Tragic Dreams and Spectral Doubles

The Metaphysical Lincoln

One of the most haunting images of the Lincoln presidency concerns an incident of doubled vision that occurred in the autumn of 1860, shortly after Lincoln's election to his first presidential term, but prior to his assuming office. Confiding the story to a handful of close friends – including his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln; the journalist, Noah Brooks; his private secretary, John Hay; and his former law partner and personal bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon – Lincoln recounted how he looked into a mirror and saw two images of his own face gazing back at him.

The earliest account of this tale of spectral doubling can be found in Brooks's article, 'Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln', which was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (July 1865). Following the excitement accompanying news of the election, Lincoln told Brooks that, as he retired to his chamber:

Opposite where I lay was a bureau, with a swinging-glass upon it – (and here he got up and placed furniture to illustrate the position) – and, looking in that glass, I saw myself reflected, nearly at full length; but my face, I noticed, had *two* separate and distinct images, the tip of the nose of one being about three inches from the tip of the other. I was a little bothered, perhaps startled, and got up and looked in the glass, but the illusion vanished. On lying down again I saw it a second time – plainer, if possible, than before; and then I noticed that one of the faces was a little paler, say five shades, than the other. I got up and the thing melted away, and I went off and, in the excitement of the hour, forgot all about it – nearly, but not quite, for the thing would once in a while come up, and give me a little pang, as though something uncomfortable had happened. When I went home I told

my wife about it, and a few days after I tried the experiment again, when [with a laugh], sure enough, the thing came again; but I never succeeded in bringing the ghost back after that, though I once tried very industriously to show it to my wife, who was worried about it somewhat. She thought it was 'a sign' that I was to be elected to a second term of office, and that the paleness of one of the faces was an omen that I should not see life through the last term.

Lamon reprinted Brooks's apparitional tale in his studies *The Life of Abraham Lincoln; From his Birth to his Inauguration as President* (1872), and *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln: 1847–1865* (1895). While Brooks's and Lamon's narratives are fundamentally similar, in the latter's account, Lincoln's interpretation of his own doubled appearance becomes conflated with the ominous significance attributed to the image. Struck by the duality of his own representation(s), Lincoln is characterised as expressing a sense of foreboding, as he sees what cannot ordinarily be seen, namely, a second, subtle body consubstantially connected with his own existential presence, a doubling that was manifested in the reflected overlays of his own representation. The Lincolns reportedly attributed fatalistic significance to this phantasmatic imagery, which they read as a simultaneous vision of a life path dividing *and* conjoining earthly existence and the afterlife. In turn, these motifs became expressed through the paradoxical unities of doublings and divisions, all of which were reflected back in the single frame of Lincoln's dual representation.

While this incident represents a striking moment in the Lincoln biography, the narrative can also be located historically within the context of the Secession Crisis of late 1860 and early 1861. During this highly charged, politically fragile moment, Secession itself represented a menacing spectre in the public imagination, as this figure was ominously described as a corporate dismemberment of the body politic. When addressing a political gathering in St. Louis on 1 August 1860, the young Republican Carl Schurz, an individual whom the social historian David M. Potter has characterised as 'one of the chief intellectual ornaments of his party', sceptically dismissed what he and others believed to be the empty threat of Secessionist action: 'By dissolving the Union! This specter has so long haunted the imagination of superstitious people, that it is time at last to anatomize the bloodless body.' Indeed, in the political rhetoric of the period, Secession figures as a haunting trope that precedes, and uncannily resembles, the spectral vision of a doubled and divided self that Lincoln reportedly encountered in the mirror three months later.

In a monograph devoted to *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (1942), Potter carefully reconstructs the interval following Lincoln's election on 6 November 1860, and his formally assuming the Presidential office on 4 March 1861. During this transitional period, Lincoln remained in Illinois, where he maintained an official 'policy of silence'. Given his notable reticence on pressing political matters during this highly fraught window of time, the accounts of Lincoln's doubled reflection as half-living and half-dead are especially striking. In particular, Lincoln is described as possessing a single, unified body, but 'two separate and distinct' facial reflections. As such, the mirror image

embodies a breakage that occurs precisely at the neck during a publicly silent yet politically volatile moment, when Lincoln occupied the paradoxical position of being a public figure without a public voice. Lincoln's doubly prescient vision evoked an opening that marked a closing, a condition that extended not only to Lincoln personally, but to the Union, the national corporate body with which the President-elect symbolically identified.

Notably, the themes of dissolution and doubling also thread through the rhetoric of Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, as the President affirmed the enduring life of the Union amidst the splintering threat of minority divisions. Clothing nationalist abstractions in anthropomorphic forms, Lincoln emphasised the impossibility of physical separation between the various sections of the country, but rather, the necessity of encountering one another 'face to face'. In presenting a viable path forward, Lincoln appealed to unseen forces to guide present realities. He concluded by alluding to a complementary set of divisions and doublings, namely, the realms separating and conjoining the living and the dead. As he famously told the nation: 'The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.'

As this suggests, Lincoln's engagement with metaphysical themes extended into the aesthetic, visionary, and mystical realms and became expressed in the 'strange dreams and presentiments' which, as Lamon noted, 'sometimes elated and sometimes disturbed him in a very astonishing degree'. These phenomena variously took the forms of spectral doublings, precognitive dreams, an engagement with sympathetic magic, pervasive conceptions of fatalism, and a fascination with the poetic qualities of the *vanitas*, that is, with artistic motifs that emphasise the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death. This compelling historical corpus provides a unique perspective on an exceptional leader's own multifaceted visions of doublings and divisions during a period of unprecedented national conflict and fragmentation. Much like his fatalistic belief in the two-fold nature of what Lamon termed Lincoln's 'brilliant and malignant star', these provocative materials reveal a president repeatedly confronting spectres of rupture and separation, while simultaneously affirming the promise of their mutual transcendence.

Spiritual But Not Religious

At the outset, it is helpful to establish a sense of Lincoln's spiritual beliefs. Among his contemporaries, there is a general consensus that Lincoln did not adhere to any established religious system, nor did he hold any particular church affiliation. As a young man, he actively challenged prevailing visions of orthodox Christianity, and he expressed views that reportedly 'bordered on atheism'. As another of Lincoln's former law partners, friends, and biographers, William H. Herndon, succinctly observed, 'as to Mr. Lincoln's religious views, he was, in short, an infidel, ... a theist. He did not believe that Jesus was God, nor the Son of God, – was a fatalist, denied the freedom of the

will. Mr. Lincoln told me *a thousand times*, that he did not believe the Bible was the revelation of God, as the Christian world contends.'

Given that he did not subscribe to the tenets of any particular religious system, what then do we know of Lincoln's spiritual beliefs? In general, Lincoln seems to have been guided by a unique sense of spirituality which, among other things, combined Deism with Enlightenment rationalism and a fatalistic sense of Calvinist determinism. An example of Lincoln's conception of a powerful interconnection between natural laws and preternatural powers can be found in his seeking out the medicinal properties of the 'mad stone' to aid in healing his son Robert when, as a child, Robert was bitten by an ostensibly rabid dog. Herndon tells us that, shortly thereafter, 'Lincoln took him to Terre Haute, Indiana, where there was a supposed mad stone with the purpose and most earnest intention of having it applied to Robert's bite and did so as well supposed...' In 1866, the Illinois State Senator Joseph Gillespie similarly recalled that Lincoln 'had great faith in the virtues of the *mad stone*, although he could give no reason for it and confessed that it looked like a superstition, but he said he found the people in the neighborhood of these stones fully impressed with a belief in their virtues from actual experiment and that was about as much as we could ever know of the properties of medicine'.

The incident with the mad stone bespeaks Lincoln's openness to the potential of sympathetic magic. As the sociologist Marcel Mauss observed in *A General Theory of Magic* (1950), sympathetic magic concerns beliefs and practices that 'cover those magical rites which follow the so-called laws of sympathy. Like produces like; contact results in contagion; the image produces the object itself; a part is seen to be the same as the whole.' Sympathetic magic is thus predicated on an underlying belief in unseen correspondences between the natural and supernatural realms, as objects seemingly held the capacity for transformation through an instrumental relation to their corresponding subjects.

Another aspect of this subject concerns the issue of Spiritualism. As was the case with other religious systems, there is no evidence that Lincoln subscribed to this movement. Indeed, in some instances he carefully maintained a sceptical distance from it, once asking Joseph Henry, the head of the Smithsonian, to investigate the suspicious phenomenon of mysterious clicking sounds produced by a medium. Yet Mrs Lincoln was undeniably drawn to Spiritualism, particularly after the death of their son Willie in 1862. As various scholars have noted, the nineteenth-century popular cultural appeal of Spiritualism is readily understandable, particularly among a female audience, as the movement may have served as a therapeutic practice offering comfort in the wake of wartime casualties and high infant mortality rates. On the subject of Spiritualism, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* once criticised Lincoln for having 'consulted spooks', a charge to which the President reportedly responded that 'the only falsehood in the statement is that the half of it has not been told. This article does not begin to tell the wonderful things I have witnessed.' During Lincoln's presidential tenure, séances were held at the White House, and in February of 1863, Lincoln accompanied his wife to a séance conducted by the Georgetown

medium Nettie Colburn. Colburn later published a memoir, entitled *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? Or, Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium* (1891), in which she described her various meetings with the Lincolns and reconstructed the details of their participation in several séances, some of which were conducted in the red parlor of the White House beginning in December of 1862. Thus much like *vanitas* imagery, the appeal of Spiritualism lay in its promise to negotiate complex sets of doublings and divisions, as mediums ostensibly traversed the boundaries separating and conjoining the realms of the dead and the living.

'A Vision of Glory and of Blood': Tragic Dreams and Fatalistic Certainties

Just as there is general agreement concerning Lincoln's religious attitudes, so too is there consensus regarding the superstitious nature of Lincoln's character. Lincoln's belief in (pre)natural laws as manifestations of divine order can be linked to his own sense of fatalism, and its corresponding expression in precognitive dreams. The most famous example concerns a vivid nightmare in which Lincoln accurately forecast his own death only a few days prior to his actual assassination on Good Friday, 14 April 1865 (fig. 1). Prior to this ominous dream, Lincoln had experienced accurate visions of military success and Union victory preceding the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg. Regarding the assassination dream, Lamon provides a detailed account, based on notes he made immediately after Lincoln's revelation of the dream to himself, Mrs Lincoln, and one or two other persons who were present at the time. According to Lamon, Lincoln told them that

About ten days ago... I retired very late. I had been up waiting for important dispatches from the front. I could not have been long in bed when I fell into a slumber, for I was weary. I soon began to dream. There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me. Then I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I thought I left my bed and wandered downstairs. There the silence was broken by the same pitiful sobbing, but the mourners were invisible. I went from room to room; no living

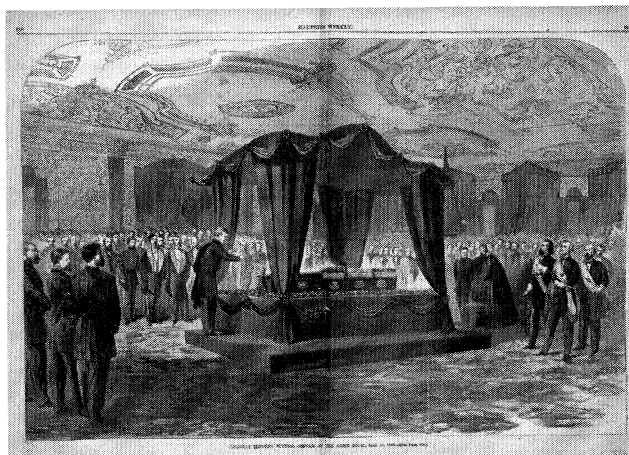


Fig. 1 *President Lincoln's Funeral Service at the White House, April 19, 1865, published in Harper's Weekly, 6 May 1865*

person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along. It was light in all rooms; every object was familiar to me; but where were all the people who were grieving as if their hearts would break? I was puzzled and alarmed. What could be the meaning of all this? Determined to find the cause of a state of things so mysterious and so shocking, I kept on until I arrived at the East Room, which I entered. There I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque, on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments. Around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards; and there was a throng of people, some gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. ‘Who is dead in the White House?’ I demanded of one of the soldiers. ‘The President,’ was his answer; ‘he was killed by an assassin!’ Then came a loud burst of grief from the crowd, which awoke me from my dream. I slept no more that night; and although it was only a dream, I have been strangely annoyed by it ever since.

Viewed in contemporary terms, what are we to make of these intricate apparitional narratives, these epistemologically anomalous accounts that elude established frameworks of empiricism, just as they are firmly embedded in an established locus of canonical – indeed, presidential – power? Once again, in the shimmering, relational spaces created by the doubled overlays of presence and absence, the natural and the supernatural, visibility and invisibility, multiple images become incorporated into a single interpretive frame. Much like Lincoln’s encounter with his own doubled and divided reflection in the looking glass, we too are left gazing at a multifaceted surface of cracks and breakages, a provocatively unstable image that conjoins various presences and absences to form a shifting, composite portrait of the President.

Vanitas and the Aesthetics of Elegy

Viewed aesthetically, Lincoln’s apparitional visions can be seen as expressions of *memento mori*, or reminders of death, as projected through the prism of an overarching fatalism. Thus it is not surprising that, throughout his life, Lincoln was drawn to *vanitas* imagery, particularly in his literary tastes. Lamon noted that the President was especially attracted to Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Lear*, and to Lord Byron’s poem ‘The Dream’ (1816). Brooks similarly observed that ‘all songs which had for their theme the rapid flight of time, decay, the recollections of early days, were sure to make a deep impression... He greatly desired to find music for his favorite poem, [William Knox’s] “Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?” and said once, when told that the newspapers had credited him with the authorship of the piece, “I should not care much for the reputation of having written that, but would be glad if I could compose music as fit to convey the sentiment as the words now do.”’ Notably, Knox’s poem has been identified as Lincoln’s favourite, not only by Lincoln’s biographers Lamon and Brooks, but by Nettie Colburn, who recalled Lincoln quoting Knox’s verse prior to a séance that she conducted at the White House in January of 1863. Thus, much like *vanitas* imagery in general, and Lincoln’s doubled and

divided visions in particular, the poetry that the President admired and recited to others shares a common conceptual framework. This imagery repeatedly draws on pairs of thematic oppositions, first to establish, and subsequently to deconstruct and merge, their underlying binary structures. As such, the aesthetic power of the *vanitas* lies in its ability to incorporate and to transcend the doubled boundaries that conjoin and divide familiar modes of temporality and categories of signification, thus evoking a porous membrane connecting an otherwise divided world.

Significantly, Lincoln not only memorised and recited Byron’s and Knox’s poems to others; he actually composed a poem in the *vanitas* mode, entitled ‘My Childhood Home I See Again’, during an autumn 1844 visit to Indiana. The poem opens with the narrator’s expressing intermingled sadness and joy as he finds himself in the domain of dreams and memory, where the living and the dead meet in a ‘mid-way world/’Twixt Earth and Paradise’. Recalling the people he knew during his youth, the verses alternate between conceptions of memory and presence, the physical and the metaphysical, life and the afterlife. Interweaving this elegiac mode of doublings and divisions, Lincoln wrote:

I hear the lone survivors tell
How naught from death could save,
Till every sound appears a knell
And every spot a grave –

Towards the end of the poem, Lincoln again engages *vanitas* motifs that emphasise sympathetic correspondences between heaven and earth, the natural and supernatural realms:

Air held his breath; the trees all still
Seemed sorr’wing angels round;
Their swelling tears in dew-drops fell
Upon the list’ning ground –

As we have seen, the poignant iconography of attendant angels would recur seventeen years later, in Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, where he presented another vivid meditation on the intimate intertwining of lugubrious divisions and doubled unions. That speech was delivered during a time when both Lincoln and the nation came ‘face to face’ with the Secession Crisis, a spectre whose threat of fragmentation became eidetically reflected in the living *vanitas* of Lincoln’s own divided self.

Divisions and Doublings in Alexander Gardner’s Cracked Plate Photograph

The intricate leitmotifs of doublings and divisions are also evident in Alexander Gardner’s famous cracked plate photograph (fig. 2). Produced in early February of 1865, this image is one of the last photographs ever made of Lincoln. Moreover, the albumen silver print now exists only as a single copy, thereby reversing the customary multiplicity associated with photography as a reproductive medium. In turn, this inversion amplifies the unique impression made by this original photographic print.

Gardner’s image seems to lie suspended between

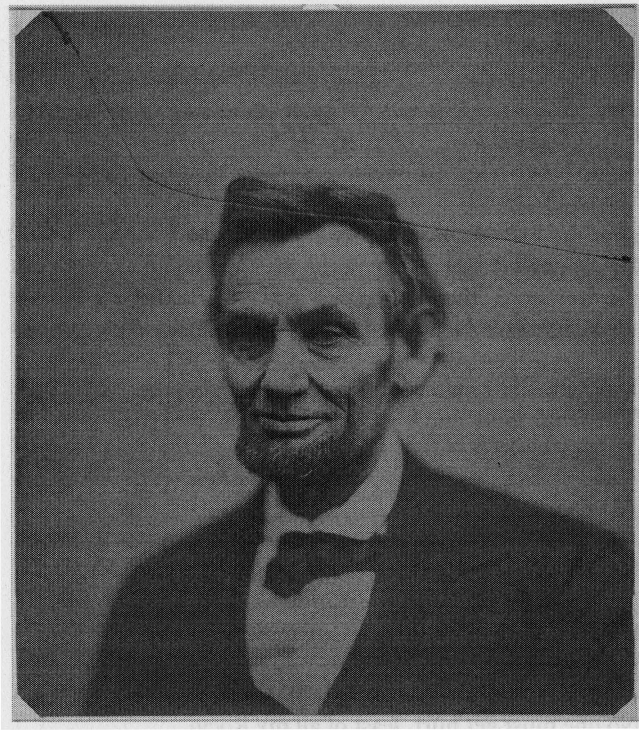


Fig. 2 Alexander Gardner, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1865, albumen silver print with a cracked glass plate, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.81.M1

multiple layers of existence and non-existence. In this close-up portrait, viewers are placed in a position of illusory contact with the President, thereby enjoying a sense of intimate proximity to a subject who remains decidedly remote, and ultimately, unreachable. At the same time, Lincoln appears so closely present in his dark suit and knotted tie, with his careworn face engaging in a slight smile, and with a direct, level gaze that is heightened by the adjacent softness of the subtle illumination surrounding his face and shoulders. Yet even as we are presented with the solidity of Lincoln's iconic presence, we also confront the jarring rupture of the crack in the glass negative. This symbolic wounding of the body of the photograph shatters

illusions of wholeness and transparency, while simultaneously heightening the associations of the relic. These themes become pronounced, both visually and metaphorically, not only in the lateral fissure that runs across the upper quarter of the sheet, but in the slight clumping of the albumen silver mixture that clusters and pools along the left and right edges of the crack, thereby indicating a porousness of boundaries, and a loss of coherence, as loose material bleeds through the otherwise pristine surface of the artwork.

Viewed historically, these doubled associations can be related to the nineteenth century's fascination with the then-innovative technology of photography, particularly the medium's capacity for mirroring and inverting the aesthetics of the *vanitas*. That is, by presenting spectral traces of human figures, photographs represent memorials of loss and visible reminders of the continuing life of the subject through the enduring presence of its representation. As such, photography affectively converts the *memento mori* into a *memento vita*.

Yet the significance of Gardner's photograph extends forward into our own present moment as well to shed valuable light on the issue of secular sacrality, on the numinous work that we ask such images to perform in secular postmodern culture. Today, Gardner's image seems to instantiate the fragmentation of the human subject through the rifts, tears, struggles, and sacrifices that are hauntingly associated with the unspeakable tragedies of slavery, Secession, war, and assassination. It is as if Lincoln had to suffer these wounds personally in order to heal them socially. Yet in Gardner's photograph, key points of vulnerability are at once publicly displayed and actively transmuted into a locus of generative power that seemingly produces a double portrait, not only of Lincoln himself, but of one of 'the better angels of our nature'.

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